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ABSTRACT

The need for new expertise in problem solving in the work setting has emerged as a woman's issue because work outside the home has become a primary means for personal goal attainment for about half the women in the United States and because traditional career patterns and norms are ineffective. Career planning is the process of individual career needs identification and information gathering aimed at a meshing of specified individual and organizational goals through a defined plan of action. The process consists of the following five steps: (1) assessment; (2) diagnosis; (3) planning; (4) intervention; and (5) evaluation. Self-assessment with the help of popular resources may be best. Diagnostic labeling is a key to problem-solving strategies. Goals should be written, specific, and measurable within a specific time frame. Resources must be available if a workable plan of action is to be developed. Dealing with inferior leadership may require some specific strategies. The employee's options include: (1) promoting herself within her company (by writing for company publications, conducting seminars, and volunteering); (2) developing an influential reputation within the company (by being up to date on field-related information and sharing it); and (3) keeping up the quality of work and the relationship with the inferior supervisor. In any job setting she must also develop contacts; it is important to plant seeds for the next job move a year or two in advance. Evaluation is a check point to see whether goals/needs are met and to investigate the need for reprocessing any of the previous stages of the problem-solving process. (15 references.) (CML)

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Problem-Solving Strategies for Career Planning

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Running Head: PROBLEM SOLVING FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Career planning is important to today's working woman. New theoretical perspectives must be identified and explored if woman's place in the work world is to be effective. Career planning as a concept is defined and specific problem-solving strategies are explored which permit the working woman to be an active agent in determining the course of her career. Phases of the problem-solving process--assessment, diagnosis, planning, intervention, and evaluation--are defined and utilized to examine methods useful for career control.

Problem-Solving Strategies for Career Planning

Introduction

Human behavior is goal oriented. Being motivated by a variety of needs, people continually test new ways to attain desirable outcomes. Work outside the home has become a primary means for personal goal attainment for approximately one half of the women in the United States (Anderson, 1983). Therefore, the need for new expertise in problem solving in the work setting has emerged as a woman's issue. In addition, the traditional career patterns and norms are ineffective (Ciabattari, 1986). Women must take control of their own careers and develop more effective problem solving methods in order to nurture their own career growth.

Definition of career planning. What is career planning? It is not merely defining an educational or promotional track with the objective of making it to the top. Rather, career planning is the process of individual career needs identification and information gathering aimed at a meshing of specified individual and organizational goals through a defined plan of action (Simonsen, 1986; Doerflein, 1985). The process

is another application of the problem solving method.

Misconceptions. To understand career planning, several misconceptions must be discarded. First, 'where am I going?' need not mean 'what is my next promotion?' Second, personal career growth, like any growth, is episodic, rather than continuous. Third, the organization is not in control of what happens to the worker; an employee can make good things happen. Fourth, career orientation must not have a future orientation; one's career is now. Fifth, what and where one wants to be, may not be the most important career question (Blessing, 1986).

Theoretical perspectives. Several authors have offered theoretical perspectives that augment a feminine approach to career problem solving. Tompkins (1986) sees the career growth life cycle as a repetitive progression through the following awareness levels: unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, decision to learn, action to develop abilities, unconscious competence, and conscious competence. This progression may involve multiple foci; such as parenting, nursing, teaching, and communication ability; which are evolving at a variety

of stages at any one time. However, the person's general career growth can be generally classified at one stage at any given point in time.

Another theoretical perspective on growth with career applications is Levinson's season's of a person's life. Levinson views life as an alternating series of stable and transition periods. Each period has specific developmental tasks and both are equally important. During stable periods the individual builds life structure based on firm choices. During the enevitable transition periods, one must terminate the stable phase, accept losses, evaluate, and determine direction for the future. Concrete events, such as marriage or retirement are not as important as the developmental tasks themselves. Tompkins correlates Levinson's growth process with personal and professional development and says that a person should feel normal when questioning what is going on in life. This awareness allows more control over the mastery of tasks in each phase.

Much the same description of the growth cycle in a woman's career is offered by Ciabattari (1986). This author warns women not to worry about falling off of

the career ladder into the bottomless pit of failure. Woman's lives do not fit into the traditional mold of a straight line to the top. Rather, a zig-zag pattern of up and down, as if climbing around in the branches of a tree, is more typical for women. Ciabattari describes seven stages or branches: starting up--learning first level skills, first plateau--an opportunity to assess progress, rounding out--finding satisfaction in life activities other than work, getting stuck--use of replanning and problem-solving strategies, starting over--back to a lower branch with new determination and strength, making it--avoiding the pinnacle syndrome and keeping one eye on the horizon, and branching out--seeking a challenge and making changes with more confidence.

Another perspective useful in career problem solving is a vertical rather than a horizontal model of the stages for individual career development constructed by Dalton, Thompson, and Price (cited in Simonsen, 1986). Four stages of career development are defined as follows: a) apprentice--period of learning new skills and norms in the work setting, b) independent contributor--a period of growth in

expertise and responsibility, c) mentor--a period in which the worker is able to contribute to the growth of of others and d) sponsor--a meshing of personal career goals with organization's needs.

The Problem Solving Process

Overview. Five simple steps constitute the problem solving process: assessment, diagnosis, planning, intervention, and evaluation (ADPIE). Assessment is the process of gathering information in a logical, systematic pattern with the purpose of exploring and examining a specific phenomenon. Diagnosis is the name-calling or labeling of that phenomenon based on the presence of a unique set of cues. These names can be listed and ranked for ease in manipulation by the problem solver.

Planning is a goal-directed harmony between the collective aspirations of the worker and the organization's need for talent (Doerflein, 1985). Interventions are specific actions structured to make goals achievable. Evaluation is a check point used to measure goal attainment and direct reentry into any previous stage of the problem solving process.

Assessment Strategies. A battery of

psychological tests and long sessions with a career counselor are only limited assessment strategies. This discussion focuses on self assessment techniques for which multiple self-help resources are available.

One of the better books on today's market is The 1986 What Color Is Your Parachute? by Richard Bolles. His Quick Job Hunting Map and Priority Grid--with a program for Apple compute--are effective tools for self assessment. The assessment process offered by Bolles focuses on skills with people, information, and things. His book covers much more than self assessment and is updated and republished annually.

One obvious and yet often overlooked assessment strategy is positive documentation of self performance (Foegen, 1986). Many employees expect the boss to tell them when they do something right or wrong, neglecting their own responsibility of self assessment. Yet Posner, Hall & Harder (1986) report that less than half of the managers surveyed are held accountable for employee development.

Employee performance is best evaluated by the employee. Management is often too busy telling the front lines what is wrong or what needs to be improved,

to give positive feedback on what is right. The employee must write anecdotal notes on their performance and honestly assess strengths and weaknesses. Soliciting validation of these events with management may avert discouraging surprises at periodic evaluations.

Another assessment strategy relates to work productivity (Cheatham, 1986). An employee interested in career development is motivated toward improved productivity within the work setting. Time and materials management resources specific to the field can be consulted for specific directions and ideas.

A somewhat unique assessment suggestion is offered by Stamell (1985). The employee should compare their own needs with those of the work setting. Eighteen questions are presented to determine what the job is doing for the worker rather than the traditional reverse situation.

Diagnostic Strategies. For over 300 years, the medical profession has had a growing list of labeling terminology called medical diagnoses. This list is highly structured, published in a three volume reference, computer compatible, and widely used.

Business administration is highly involved in the processing of problem-oriented information and has developed systems for information retrieval and analysis, but little has been done in the diagnostic realm other than light-hearted writing. For example, Cheatham (1986) outlines and labels productivity diseases using such terminology as "Wonder Woman Syndrome", the label for a woman with "a complete inability of the lips to form the word 'no'" (p. 49).

A more serious undertaking of the development of diagnostic labeling would enhance career development and problem-solving research. Specific strategies for solving common problems could be quantified and studied. How many women must fall into the Wonder Woman Syndrome and struggle alone for solutions because there is no good way to communicate which solution are most effective for this diagnosis? Diagnostic labeling is a key to problem solving strategies.

Planning Strategies. Meaningful career development does three things. First, it identifies the needs and goals of the worker and employer. Second, it structures information, assistance, and other resources in matching the needs and goals of

workers and the organization. Third, it determines a plan of action to meet specified goals (Simonsen, 1986).

More formally, career planning can be a joint career management activity and include mutual goal setting and career pathing--specific promotional sequencing (Simonsen, 1986). Many companies do offer a formal career development program such as Holiday Inn and Exxon, however, the assertive employee with a little self education in the process through the literature, can seek out existing company resources to accomplish the same goals (Doerflein, 1985).

Goal determination should directly follow the assessment and diagnosis steps and should be based on identified needs (Tompkins, 1985). One must be careful not to confuse needs with values, however, as this may create unattainable goals (Simonsen, 1986). In the future, goals may move away from the present ladder concept orientation to more of an identity orientation (Blessing, 1986). If one should desire to remain in the independent contributor stage as described by Simonsen (1986) career pathing with sponsorship level goals would be unrealistic. Goals should be written,

specific, and measurable within a specific time frame.

Identification of resources is an often neglected step in the planning process. Human, financial, educational, and personal resources must be available if a workable plan of action is to be developed. Not to be overlooked on the resource list are workshops in career management, mentors, and networks, especially if a formally structured program is not available.

The plan of action is now developed, outlining measures to attain goals using the available resources. The plan of action must be detailed and time oriented. Who will use what resources in what way should be specified.

Intervention Strategies. Making career choices can be considered an intervention strategy. One method for making choices was originally offered by Ben Franklin as a moral or prudential form of algebra. His method of identifying and weighting the variables that affect choices has recently been mathematically defined and can now be rapidly conducted by computer programs (Canada, Frazelle, Koger, & MacCormac, 1985). Although these processes have been developed for use in research activities, applications for personal computers should

soon follow.

The career minded woman must also employ the strategy of responsibility for her own career. This requires that the woman become an active agent. She must work to make things happen for herself. Many women may find this difficult if their role orientation has been to nurture others at their own expense (Anderson, 1983).

Dealing with inferior leadership may require some specific strategies. If the employee wants to stay with the company, several approaches may help. These include promoting self within the company in other departments (such as writing for company publications, conducting a seminar, volunteer work), b) developing an influential reputation within the company (being up to date on field related information and sharing it), c) developing communication and d) keeping up the quality of work and the relationship with the inferior supervisor (Half, 1986).

A strategy that must be ongoing in any job setting is the development of contacts. It is not wise to wait to develop them when they are needed, because careful contact development can take months and years.

Stechert (1986) offers a variety of strategies related to contact development. One must plant seeds for the next job move a year or two in advance. Higher-ups in the company must be made aware that an employee is not satisfied with middle management aspirations. Most jobs are filled by word of mouth; therefore, it is important to establish a network of loyal colleagues to communicate through.

When all else fails, the employee may decide to look for greener pastures. Many companies now offer formal outplacement services to employees who are terminating employment. Outplacement is a defined service to assist the employee in finding another position outside the company and can include such activities as self-assessment, targeted resumes, practice of interviewing skills, coaching in such activities as contract use, access to publications with job ads, office space, secretarial support, a job-seeking regimen which replaces the former job related tasks, and life-management and financial planning (Gelb, 1986). Even if these services are not formally available, they may be negotiated for on an individual basis.

Evaluation Strategies. According to Richard Bolles (1986) the job search should do more for an individual than find a job. Evaluation is a check point to see if goals/needs are met and investigate the need for reprocessing any of the stages of the problem solving process. At this stage the result of problem solving activities must be evaluated. Many of the same strategies for problem solving discussed under assessment can be reused here.

According to Blessing (1986) there is a risk in becoming more than we were yesterday. The individual may have grown through the problem-solving process and now have new needs and values, new demands and problems. The resulting change likely has created new opportunities to exercise problem solving. Thus, the life of the working woman continues . . .

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